THE LIVESTOCK MARKETS OF NORFOLK, 1929-1964

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Introduction

For many centuries in Britain, livestock markets and fairs have been a part of the traditional pattern of rural life, and a principal means for the farmer of acquiring or disposing of livestock. The system survives at the present, and is a significant facet of the economic geography of any rural area. Sales, conducted by a professional auctioneer, are held weekly or fortnightly in the markets and seasonally at fairs, each group of animals offered being sold to the highest bidder. This paper uses data collected from the auctioneers conducting the markets in the County of Norfolk, to examine changes in the geography of livestock marketing in the county between 1929 and 1964, the nature of the processes involved, and their inter-relation with other aspects of the human and economic geography of the county.

In the late 1920's the Ministry of Agriculture published a series of reports on Markets and Fairs in England and Wales,[1] which give the basis for geographical analysis on a countrywide scale.[2] The development of markets and market towns in East Anglia up to the 1920's has been examined in some detail by Dickinson,[3] but substantial further changes have taken place since then; in particular there has been a decrease in the total number of animals passing through the markets of Norfolk and in the number of markets and fairs themselves.

Changing Patterns, 1929-1964

The distribution and location of the markets and fairs is shown in Figs. 1 and 2. Twenty-five markets were operating in 1929 already considerably fewer than there had been a century before. The nodality of most markets is emphasised by the pattern of main roads (Fig. 1) and the importance of rail transport to livestock marketing up to the 1920's is emphasised by the very large proportion of markets which occupy railside sites (Fig. 2). All the livestock fairs in 1929 were located close to railway stations, and railways provided the principal means of transporting livestock at this time. All the markets, but not all the fairs, were related to the existence of well established settlements of varying size, although functionally many of these had the status of 'urban villages' rather than true towns.[4] Figs. 3 and 4 relate the size of the markets, in terms of the numbers of animals sold, to the distribution pattern for 1929 and 1961 respectively, the latter being the most recent year for which

[1] Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Reports on Marketing, Economic Series, 1925 onwards. Of particular relevance to livestock marketing are Nos. 13, 14, 19, 23, 26.

[2] R. E. DICKINSON & H. C. K. HENDERSON, The livestock markets of England and Wales, *Geography* 16 (1931), p. 187–94.

[3] R. E. DICKINSON, The distribution of functions of the smaller settlements of East Anglia, *Geography* 17 (1932), p. 19–31;
R. E. DICKINSON, The markets and market areas of East Anglia, *Economic Geography* 10 (1934), p. 172–82;
R. E. DICKINSON, City, region and regionalism 1947, p. 76–91.

[4] DICKINSON, (1932 & 1947) *op. cit.*,

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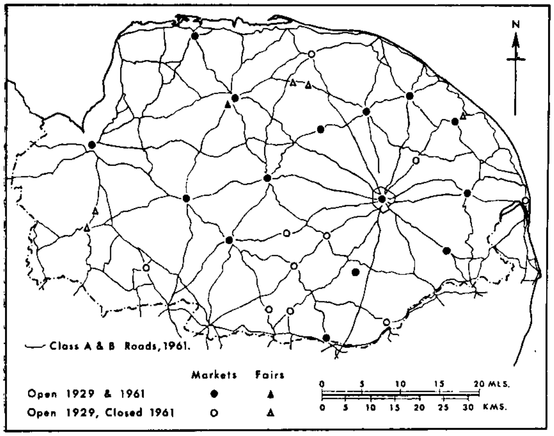

Fig. 1: Norfolk: the location of livestock markets and fairs, 1929 and 1961, related to the road network

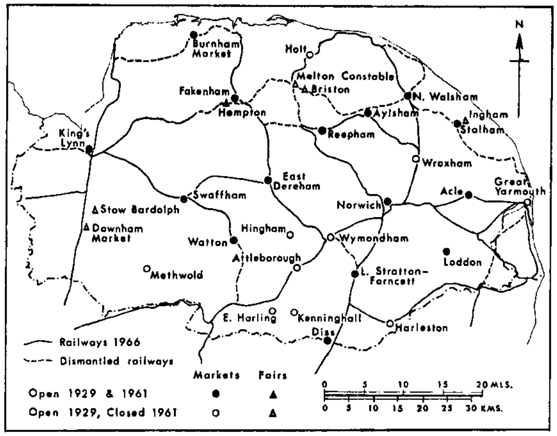

Fig. 2: Norfolk: the location of livestock markets and fairs, 1929 and 1961, related to railways

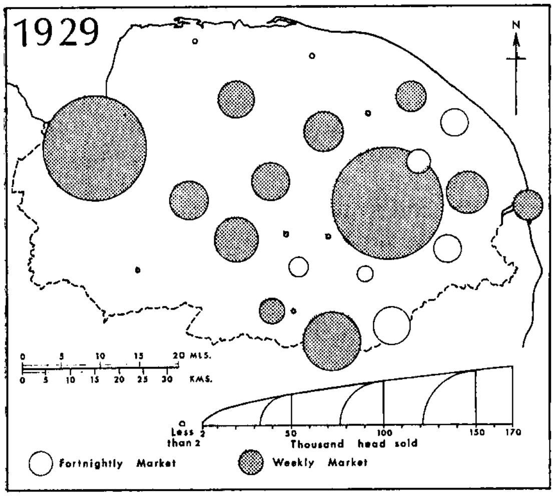

Fig. 3: Norfolk: the annual turnover of livestock markets, 1929

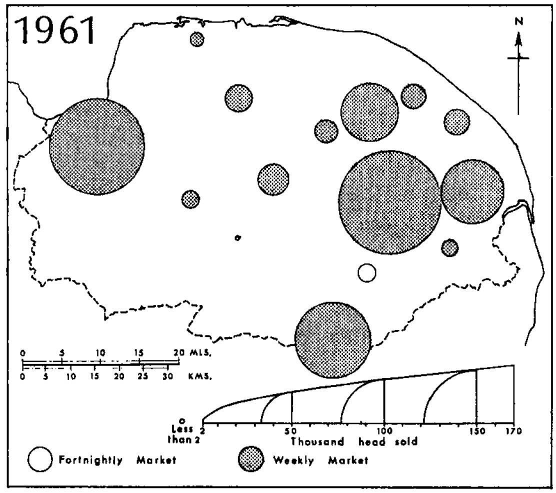

Fig. 4: Norfolk: the annual turnover of livestock markets, 1961

universal data were obtainable. The disappearance of many markets is immediately evident; from 25 markets in 1929, 20 survived in 1955, and a further six had closed by 1963, a decrease of 44 % in 24 years. The total number of livestock handled fell from 582,000 in 1929 to 490,000 in 1961, although the latter figure is somewhat depressed by a temporary closure of Norwich market during a local outbreak of foot and mouth disease. This reveals that there has been a trend of centralisation of the marketing function for the decrease in the number of the markets is proportionally much greater than that in numbers of livestock. No new market has been established, except that the functions of Long Stratton Market were transferred 3 kms. to Forncett, a change of site within a locality comparable with the removal of several other surviving markets to new premises in the same towns.

It is mostly the smaller markets of 1929 that have subsequently closed, especially where they were too closely spaced for survival (e.g. in the area south-west of Norwich). However, Watton declined from being the fourth ranking market in 1929 with over 24,000 animals sold, to sell only 1,128 animals in 1961, and finally closed in 1963. Aylsham on the other hand rose from sales of 910 animals in 1929 to almost 41,000 in 1961, the fifth largest turnover in the county. If it has been mostly the smaller markets that have succumbed in the process of centralisation, it is evident that the effects upon the surviving markets have varied considerably. The annual turnover at Loddon and at Fakenham fell by over 50 % between 1929 and 1961, and Reepham and Swaffham like Watton suffered even greater reductions. Other markets maintained turnover at roughly pre-war levels, or like Acle, Diss and Aylsham showed substantial increases. Norwich also grew, as the turnover for 1963 shows, though the growth is obscured in 1961 by the period of inactivity occasioned by the outbreak of foot and mouth disease mentioned above. Forncett is the only survivor of the eight markets which operated fortnightly in 1929, and is the only market that does not function weekly at the present.

The Livestock fairs, which numbered six in 1929, have almost entirely disappeared from the county. The largest, at Hempton, Melton Constable, and Briston, were all concerned mainly with store sheep and held in the summer or autumn. Hempton is the sole survivor, handling between 3-4,000 sheep annually. Ingham on the other hand was a cattle fair, selling about 400 beasts annually in the late 1920's and Briston added some 300 cattle to its 2,300 sheep per year. Downham Market and Stow Bardolph were by 1929 cattle fairs only in name, selling 30 and 10 beasts respectively, the local holiday associated with the fairs being the major reason for holding them at this period.

This then is the pattern of change observed. The three main trends which demand an explanation are an overall decrease in importance of livestock markets, a marked centralisation of activity in the surviving markets and the almost total disappearance of the livestock fairs.

The Factors of Change

In examining the reasons for those changes one may recognise the influence of both external and internal factors. External factors are those outside the immediate sphere of livestock marketing, chiefly agrarian changes which affect the numbers and types of livestock offered for sale. Internal factors are those directly involved in the economics and structure of livestock- and meat-marketing, of which the livestock markets are but one part, and that subject to change in relation to other channels of trade. The distinction is not always clear-cut, but is nevertheless useful in the present context. Clearly it is the external factors which have most effect upon the livestock offered for sale, and here we must consider types as well as total numbers.

The overall drop in sales of 16 % conceals the significant fact that sheep have almost disappeared from the markets in the course of the thirty-two years, while the numbers of pigs sold has nearly doubled so that pigs constituted 64 % by number of all livestock passing through the markets in 1961. The decrease in numbers of cattle marketed accords roughly with the overall decrease in sales.

TABLE 1: LIVESTOCK MARKETS OF NORFOLK: TOTAL ANNUAL SALES OF LIVESTOCK BY TYPE, 1929 AND 1961

	1929	1961	Percentage change 1929/1961
Cattle and calves	174,350	140,441	—19
Sheep and lambs	231,960	35,931	—85
Pigs	175,940	313,622	+78
Total livestock	582,250	489,994	—16

The Influence of Changes in Farming Systems

Changes in the numbers of pigs and sheep marketed are explicable in general terms by changes in farming practice. The annual agricultural censuses (June 4th Returns) show a decrease in the number of sheep and lambs in Norfolk of 66 % between 1930 and 1960 which would account for much of the 85 % decrease in sheep marketed. Similarly the number of pigs on farms in the country rose by 61 % in the same period, while the increase in pigs marketed was 78 % over the slightly longer period to which these figures refer. Such explanations do not serve in the case of cattle, for the numbers of cattle on farms increased by 52 % from 1930 to 1960, while the numbers passing through the markets decreased by 19 %.

The decrease in sheep numbers may be attributed in part to low wool prices during the depression of the 1930's, in part to the increasing use of chemical fertilisers, which reduced the farmers' dependence upon sheep for natural manure and also to the increasing competition of Australasian mutton on the British market, all of which helped to render large hurdled flocks of 'arable sheep' unprofitable. Another factor was the food production campaign of the Second World War, which brought about a heavy concentration upon cereals and roots in East Anglia, and incidentally demonstrated the extent to which, with changing technology, sheep were no longer essential for the maintenance of soil fertility as they had been. Post-war government policies have tended to preserve the pattern evolved during the war, and large flocks of sheep are found only on the lighter soils from Thetford to Fakenham, where leys are prominent in the rotations. The decrease in sheep kept is the main factor in the decline of the fairs, whose trade was largely in sheep. Pig numbers have increased over the country as a whole. Kept by intensive or semi-intensive methods, pigs use little land, thus fitting well in a predominantly arable system, capable of consuming surplus cereals or potatoes when the market for these is unfavourable, and thus providing a significant second storey in the farm economy especially on the smaller farms, where their manure will also be of particular value.

In considering the drop in cattle sales, an external factor of rather different kind appears to be significant. Details of store cattle marketed in 1929 are available only for certain markets, but Norwich was the major store cattle market. Here in 1929 were sold over 59,000 stores, while the number was half that in 1962; the only other market handling significant numbers of stores has been Kings Lynn, where the numbers have been maintained (1928 - 14,390, 1962 - 13,866). The figures for Norwich point to a move away from a traditional Norfolk practice of fattening beasts reared in Ireland, Wales and the north and west of England.[5] Nowadays more farmers are combining fattening with rearing, and many cattle that would previously have passed through the markets twice, first as stores and then as fat cattle, are marketed once only as fat cattle. The effect on the markets is partly offset by the marketing of calves from outside the county for sale to rearing and fattening farms, Kings Lynn and Norwich handling between them about 8,000 more calves in 1962 than in 1928.

There has also been a small decline in the marketing of dairy cattle. Again details cannot be obtained for all markets in the county, but the same two major markets showed a decrease from over 5,000 in 1928 to 2,300 in 1960. This seems to indicate a greater degree of self sufficiency in dairy herds, partly enforced in the nineteen-thirties by a desire to avoid the danger of introducing disease, and assisted more recently by the possibilities of introducing desirable strains to the herd through artificial insemination, without the need to buy expensive bulls for breeding.

The Effects of New Marketing Methods

Developments in livestock marketing methods since the Second World War constitute the main internal factors affecting the traditional markets. One of these developments has been in the activities of co-operative organisations in marketing. These include both large bodies such as Eastern Counties' Farmers Ltd., Select Livestock Marketing and the Fatstock Marketing Corporation Ltd., and a number of smaller group marketing schemes involving some fifteen to twenty farmers each. These organisations have been responsible for bringing store cattle into the county, and in many cases selling direct to the farmer, so that the local livestock markets are bypassed. With fatstock, large-scale farmers especially are under pressure to contract their stock on either a liveweight or a deadweight basis to wholesale meat dealers such as those located at Stowmarket (Suffolk), Great Yarmouth and Watton, to large manufacturers, to multiple-outlet retail concerns and to bacon factories such as those at Elmswell, Ipswich and Stowmarket, in Suffolk. In addition, the large co-operatives already mentioned have been increasing their purchases of fatstock for resale to these large concerns; one co-operative alone purchased directly 8,200 fat cattle from Norfolk farms in 1959 and in 12 months during 1959/60 also bought 32,678 bacon pigs. It is evident therefore that it is not only the cattle trade which is tending to be diverted to other channels at the expense of the markets.

The alternative channels achieve reduced costs in transport, and avoid market tolls and levies, so that the large concerns are able to offer relatively high farm gate prices (i.e. transport paid) on livestock sold by the farmer and discount on bulk purchases he makes from these large organisations. The farmer also has the security of a certain market, and contract prices which may well be higher than he would get at auction on a particular day. In other words, "many of the new ideas in marketing reflect the desire to operate under a system where both the market, and, if possible, the price are known in advance".[6] Additional advantages are the certainty of prompt payment, and the saving of the farmer's time in not attending the market, which may be very significant in view of increasing labour costs on farms. A few farmers who have tried contract marketing of pigs, have abandoned it because they found the contractor unreliable, but it seems that such cases are rare.

Finally, it is to be noted that contract sales are particularly advantageous to the farmer who is developing intensive indoor systems of livestock rearing and fattening, and who does not wish to find himself in the dilemma of either selling at a low market price, or delaying sale until prices improve, thus disturbing the cycle of use of his buildings and other capital equipment. Both

[5] F. E. Shotton, *in:* F. Briers (Ed.), Norwich and its region, British Association for the Advancement of Science 1961, p. 171.

[6] P. R. Dodds, Help for new ideas in marketing, *Agriculture* 70 (1963), p. 569–572.

producer and purchaser thus benefit from the contract sale arrangement.

The Effects of Government Action and Controls

If economics and security are the basis of the new marketing channels, these have also been favoured by three post-war developments: the Market Development Scheme, the introduction of more stringent slaughterhouse regulations, and occasional closures of livestock markets because of disease outbreaks. The Market Development Scheme has made government funds available to assist farmers in establishing group marketing schemes which are an alternative to the traditional markets, by the purchase of mobile weighbridges for example. Before the Second World War most butchers had their own slaughterhouses and bought fat beasts in the markets for slaughter, but during the war slaughtering was centralised in association with government collecting and grading centres. This control lasted until 1954, when new slaughterhouse regulations in the 1954 Slaughter of Animals Amendment Act made it more economic for most butchers to buy meat wholesale rather than to modernise their own premises to the required standards. Thus, while the wholesale firms do still buy in the markets, more opportunities exist for direct dealing between farmer and wholesaler.

Temporary market closures have been common in recent years, due in part to the enlightened attitudes of the market owners, and also to the regulations imposed in the Diseases of Animals Act of 1950. Thus swine fever restrictions closed Kings Lynn market to store pigs for nine months and both Forncett and Aylsham for over a year in 1962/63. Forncett and Aylsham together with Norwich, were also closed to cattle for over two months in 1960/61, because of foot-and-mouth disease restrictions. It is at such times that farmers with healthy animals are particularly likely to see the advantage of contract sales and to make arrangements, which means that they do not return to patronise the markets when these reopen.

The Significance of the Private Ownership of Markets

If the foregoing does much to explain the changes that have occurred, it does not account entirely for the geographical distribution of the changes. It is important to realise that most of the markets concerned are privately owned and run as parts of the businesses of various firms of Estate Agents and Auctioneers. Norwich, Kings Lynn, and East Derham are exceptions in that the market facilities are municipally owned, but the sales are nevertheless conducted by private firms. It is therefore not necessary for a given market to make a profit on livestock sales if the owners consider that the operation of the market provides invisible profits through contacts maintained and other classes of business brought in. Nevertheless there is a limit to this type of compensation, and falling trade has undoubtedly influenced owners' decisions to close various markets. In some cases the smaller markets survived for many years solely because of thriving small-livestock and deadstock markets alongside which they operated. Examples include Kenninghall, Hingham and Aylsham in 1929 and Swaffham in 1963. In many instances a firm has operated more than one market, the markets of Wroxham, Loddon and Acle, for example, each being in the hands of one of the Auctioneers conducting sales at Norwich market. Thus the process of centralisation has been able to take place within firms as well as by the withdrawal of some firms from livestock auctioneering.

Each of the six markets closed between 1955 and 1964 was closed because the auctioneer considered that the numbers of stock offered for sale did not justify continuing in business. These numbers of course depend upon the vendors, who will wish to sell where the best prices may be obtained. The advantages of selling in one of the larger markets are several; in general, prices will be higher than in a small market, and good quality of stock is more likely to be recognised in the price paid, for there are more buyers, and they tend to buy on a larger scale. In the small markets prices tend to be lower, and the possibility of 'ringing' (i.e. agreement between major buyers not to bid against each other) also leads to uncertainty concerning the prices likely to be obtained. Conditions for handling stock vary as well, many of the smaller markets having no covered accommodation, while in 1929 half the accommodation was already under roofs at both Kings Lynn and Diss. The Ministry of Agriculture reports indicate that all these advantages of patronising the larger markets already existed in the 1920's.

The Size of Markets and Areas Served

In considering the location of livestock markets, one must consider their relationship to the towns and villages of the county. Dickinson[7] has stressed the interdependence of settlement and market in their development, and the extent

[7] Dickinson, (1932 & 1947), *op. cit.*

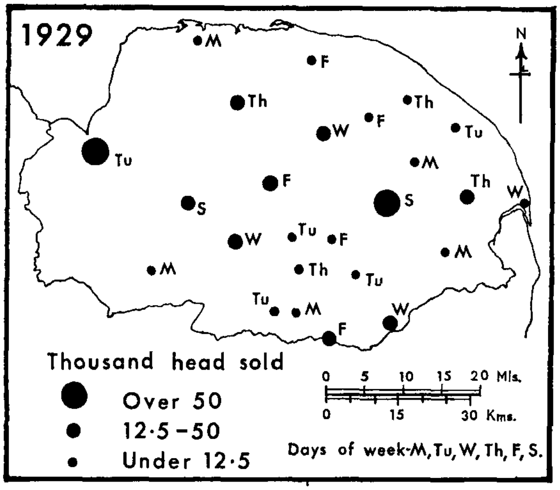

Fig. 5: Norfolk: market days at the livestock markets in 1929

to which nodality in relation to communications has been a major factor in determining the growth of markets. Physical nodality is seen to be important only in the case of the coastal markets, all of which have suffered because of the limited range of directions from which potential sellers may be drawn. In general there is a correspondence between size of settlement and size of market; the largest markets are those which enjoy the greatest accessibility, and they also offer the greatest range of facilities for other agricultural trading, for entertainment, and for the exchange of ideas.

From the farmer's point of view, unless he farms close to a large market, he has to weigh all these advantages against the increased costs of entering his stock at a more distant large market rather than a nearby small one – costs of transport, the time involved, and the possible detrimental effects of the longer journey upon the stock are the main factors to consider. These considerations might be expected to impose a maximum distance over which the farmer would transport stock to market. In fact there are so many variables that the pattern is greatly modified from any simple theoretical system of circular or polygonal supply areas. The prices of stock cannot always be accurately predicted, and if they could, the scale of operation of the farmer or dealer would affect the economic distance that stock might be brought. Thus in 1929, all store cattle entered at Norwich market were from dealers outside the county of Norfolk, whereas 90 % of the fat cattle and dairy animals came from within the county, and almost half of them direct from farmers. In no case did a farmer from outside the county enter stock at Norwich.

Thus in 1929 the smaller markets such as Attleborough, Aylsham, Holt and Wymondham drew stock from up to 13 kms. away, while in the medium markets it was unusual to find stock from more than 13 kms. distant, except in the case of stores; Diss was quoted as drawing stock from up to 25 kms.[8] Only Norwich and Kings Lynn drew stock from very much greater distances.

It follows that the larger the markets, the more widely they are likely to be spaced, and further that it is likely that no small market will be able to survive in close proximity to a large one. Theoretically the spacing of markets should correlate inversely with their size in a pattern which is hierarchical in terms of size if not of function. The pattern is complicated to some extent by the fact that different markets are held on different days of the week. Indeed, it is customary for adjacent markets to operate on different days of the week, so that they are not directly in competition for livestock offered at any given time (Fig. 5). These general principles apply to the pattern in Norfolk in 1929, with the exception of an anomalous group of small markets, mostly held fortnightly, in the areas south and west of Norwich, and well within the area where one would expect the strength of Norwich to exclude competing markets.

Factors Favouring Centralisation

Changes in the circumstances influencing market location since 1929 would be expected to have produced changes in the marketing pattern. The most significant change has been in methods of transporting livestock. In 1929 the use of motor vehicles to convey livestock was very limited. Most stock entered by farmers was driven to market on the hoof, which meant an absolute maximum of 25 to 30 kms. from farm to market, unless the driving were to take more than one day. Fatstock could not be driven large distances without losing condition and thereby value. Stock brought by dealers from a distance might travel by sea, completing the journey by rail or on the hoof, or might be railed or even driven on the hoof over distances entailing several days' travelling.

These methods applied especially to large scale entries of Irish store cattle, of which Norwich

[8] Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Markets and fairs in England and Wales, Part IV: Eastern and Southern markets, Economic Series, No. 23, London H.M.S.O., 1929, p. 69–74.

handled nearly 63,000 in 1920. The improvement in road transport since then has brought the larger markets within the reach of every farmer, at relatively small extra cost and much reduced risk of harm to his stock. The advantages have been considerable for long-distance journeys as well, so that very little use has been made of the new railway sidings built for the market at Norwich in 1960, at a cost of £27,000.

There has also been a tendency to increase the scale of farming, and thus of marketing. Farms over 700 acres in Norfolk numbered 127 in 1935 and 204 in 1960. Meanwhile the operation of co-operative marketing groups has introduced scale economics in transport, and again rendered the larger markets more accessible. Larger groups of stock being offered have added an incentive to use the larger markets, where a fair price is more dependable. This tendency has been accentuated by a widening price differential between the large and small markets, as fewer stock has led to fewer buyers, and thus less competition to buy in the small markets. In the past, fat animals were largely bought by local butchers, who dominated the small markets; these men now get their supplies through wholesale dealers, and the activities of such dealers, large retail firms, and bacon factories has tended further to raise prices in the larger markets. An extreme case arose in the spring of 1964 when during a meat shortage on the Continent, as many as ten foreign buyers were represented weekly in Norwich, ensuring good prices there. During this period, fatstock sales at Burnham Market, 55 kms. away, were 33 % below the corresponding period of 1963, a decline attributed by the auctioneer almost entirely to the higher prices fetched in Norwich. Many other markets experienced similar decreases, but Kings Lynn enjoyed increased entries, as sellers anticipated a similar rise in price in another market of comparable size to Norwich.

There has also been a widening discrepancy in the facilities of markets, as the larger markets have been able to expand their high quality facilities. Aylsham, Diss and Kings Lynn have all increased their covered accommodation between 1954 and 1960, and in 1960 Norwich market moved from the town centre to a fine new site and buildings. Few developments have taken place elsewhere, and the recommendations of the Verdon-Smith Report[9] in 1964 that live fatstock marketing be replaced by a system of deadweight sales jeopardised the future of all those markets which had not a substantial turnover of stores, though no action has been taken on this.

These then, were the main reasons for centralisation, and the pattern is one of the larger 1929 markets extending their influence over increasing areas, at the expense of the smaller. Three markets closed between 1929 and 1939, a further five in the decade up to 1955 and six more by 1964. Most of the remaining smaller markets have declined steadily, the extent and rapidity of decline depending partly on their initial size, and partly on their distance from the nearest large expanding market. Reepham and Fakenham have declined from around 20,000 head of stock in 1929 to 6.000 and 9,000 respectively in 1961. Burnham Market may be quoted to illustrate the beneficial effect of distance from a large market, for it has grown from 500 head handled in 1929 to over 4,000 in 1963. A side effect of growing areas of influence has been to bring into conflict pairs of markets operating on the same day of the week, something which the auctioneers have always tried to avoid, and which seems to have hastened the demise of Holt in favour of Aylsham and of Harleston in favour of Halesworth (Suffolk). (See Fig. 5).

Although the major role of Norwich is emphasised, numbers of livestock handled were less in 1961 than in 1929; this is partly because of temporary closures in 1961, the number of stock being increased again by some 40,000 in 1963. One should also note that there had been a substantial decrease in the numbers of store cattle passing through the market, and that most other classes of stock were handled in greater number in 1961 than in 1929. Since Norwich had been the only market to handle large numbers of stores, this serves to emphasise its increasing area of influence for other classes of stock, as other markets were not affected by falling numbers of stores offered.

One factor which has tended to retard the process of centralisation has been the increase in marketing of fat pigs. This has been so great that it has been the saving of a number of the smaller markets. Although large-scale pig farming is often associated with new marketing methods, small-scale pig farming as a supplement to arable farming has provided continuing trade for the livestock markets. Thus nine of the fourteen surviving markets in 1961 handled more pigs than they had in 1929, of which four, namely Fakenham, Forncett, Stalham and

[9] W. R. Verdon-Smith (Chairman), Committee of enquiry into fatstock and carcase meat marketing and distribution: Report London H.M.S.O., 1964.

Swaffham showed an increase in pig sales despite their overall decline.

Finally, in a period of declining importance of livestock markets, it is not surprising that no new markets have arisen. As the progress of centralisation has taken toll of smaller markets over the last ninety years or so, the surviving markets have been those enjoying the greatest nodality. The increased flexibility of road transport has not brought to light any location superior to the existing ones. In general the largest markets remain in the largest towns, and enjoy a host of benefits that no new location is likely to be able to equal, let alone surpass.

Conclusion

The changes which have taken place in the twenty-five years under review are complex, both in nature and causation. The livestock fairs have disappeared mainly because the need is no longer felt for local seasonal sales of livestock in an increasingly mobile rural economy, while the social importance of these rural occasions has been undermined by the increasing accessibility of more sophisticated forms of entertainment. An outstanding feature in the changing situation is the increasing scale of activity, to some extent in farming itself, but particularly in various phases of livestock marketing. These changes have tended to make the traditional livestock auction superfluous for the sale of certain types of livestock, for which direct purchase schemes have proved advantageous, and have led to the overall decline of traditional livestock marketing. Nevertheless, there remain many relatively small farm businesses operated by individuals who neither purchase nor produce on a scale attractive to the large organisations promoting contract sales. The services of an auctioneer, the middleman of the traditional marketing system, will continue to be required at least by the smaller farmer, and the traditional livestock markets are likely to remain an important part of rural life in the forseeable future. At the same time the progressive centralisation of auctions in fewer larger markets is a trend which is likely to continue.